

Dear Amy,

I am having a homework crisis and it's easier to write when I am writing *to* someone. You know that I have been impressed by the writing assignments for various classes you've posted on your blog. I hope my desperate circumstances, my admiration for your writing, and our long friendship will make you forgive me for sending what will, I hope, be a three to five page email about John Dewey.

You will, of course, remember our friend Mr. Dewey from the library, but in addition to the Dewey Decimal System he also pretty much invented anything that is good about public education, and specifically warned us against all the things we've done wrong in our schools. However, I am finding him harder to read than I expected. The Dewey essays I'd read before --*The Child and the Curriculum; The School and Society*-- were pretty straightforward writing, often even lyrical; they were written around 1900 but hold up awfully well. All his ideas are ones that I already agree with, so there's nothing to struggle with. For example, he makes very strong arguments for schools to be based not around the content of the curriculum but around the experience of the child, and that anything you plan to teach a child needs to be rooted in the child's own experience. His Chicago lab school gave us our best early example of project-based learning, which is what we used to do at Duke School, and I still am very attached to that kind of teaching. And in those essays he always had charming anecdotes about his own school interspersed as examples.

I honestly thought I'd be able to read this much longer collection of essays on the flight to Memphis, as if it were just another airplane novel, but we'd had to get up very early, and reading From Absolutism to Experimentalism, I kept falling asleep. It was written in 1930, sort of mid-career for Dewey, as a reminiscence of how he gradually found himself placed along a spectrum of thinkers: theological liberals and Calvinist "Scotch" theologians, German idealists and contemporary psychologists. Dewey was a graduate student at the end of America's "pioneer period" and the beginning of the Industrial Age; evidently it was a hot time for philosophers. His teachers were strongly influenced by Hegel. I vaguely remember Hegel from high school (don't laugh, you know what I meant) and had been content to have forgotten everything I knew about him. So in general I was off to a terrible start.

But I do have a lot of sympathy for the major philosophical problem that Dewey identifies for himself. His career in philosophy was sparked by a desire to find "a world and a life that would have the same properties as had the human organism," in other words, a philosophy where ideas and experiences work together in a unified whole. I've also longed for a life where my ideas, and ideals, are matched by my "real" life, or at least abide in less sharp contrast. I don't know that I'm any closer now than twenty years ago, but I suppose the gap in between is less painful now than when I was younger, perhaps because I've simply gotten tougher in tolerating it. Anyway, Dewey describes "...an inner demand for an intellectual technique that would be consistent and yet capable of flexible adaptation to the concrete diversity of experienced things..." Evidently this is where the Hegel bit comes in. Growing up in New England, Dewey had absorbed that painful sense of isolation, and a sense of division between the soul and body, God and Nature. (*So you see, you and I may blame the painful isolation and the rendering of our souls into pieces on having grown up in New England.*) Hegel unifies these elements, dissolving the walls between matter and spirit, subject and object, the individual and History.* Dewey claims Hegel

and Plato as his favorite philosophers, but also states that his own philosophy is based more on what he's learned through experience (teaching children, for example) than what he learned in books. He also describes his work in education as having sparked a synthesis between his interest in psychology and his interest in social institutions, and calls education "the supreme human interest in which... other problems, cosmological, moral, logical, come to a head." And of course I agree.

Dewey tells us that in his student days almost all philosophers were clergymen, and there was an intense debate between what we can know through intuition vs through "sensational empiricism," but even by 1930 he seems to think this argument was a thing of the past. He mentions it mostly as an example of why we mustn't get too fixated on the importance of "contemporary" problems – he thinks it's important to understand the history of philosophic thought, as it gives us perspective, but that if philosophy isn't making the world a better place to live in, it isn't doing its job.

He states firmly all along that we may expect religion to adapt itself to science, and as we learn new scientific truths religious truths will adjust. So he specifically doesn't see conflict between science and religion as a problem. However, he does see the division between science and morals as a major problem, and his own work is in some ways a long argument for science and ethics to work hand-in-hand. He calls that partnership "instrumentalism," a term which comes up a lot.

He particularly notes contemporary developments in psychology as important pieces of the puzzle, connecting human thought with human experience. He looks for an "integrated synthesis" of philosophy, modern science – especially psychology-- and contemporary problems in education, morals, religion, and social subjects such as history, economics, etc. By contemporary, he means *anybody's* contemporary: that the problems you and I puzzle over will be different ones from his problems, but that our most modern understandings of science should impact our ethical approach to the solutions. He sees little point in philosophy that mulls continually over the problems of the ancient Greeks: "...a chief task of those who call themselves philosophers is to help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future." Now that's the nice, clear, lyrical Dewey I love. But still, you would not believe how long it took me to get through that essay, and it's only a dozen pages.

The collection we're working with has wonderful introductions for each essay, and arranges them not chronologically but thematically, so I thought it might be easier going if I picked a different section of the book to read. That first essay was from "Historical Roots and Reflections." The next sections were about psychology, and I guess if I'm going to read psychology I want to read something less than 100 years old, and I'm sure Dewey would forgive me. But all throughout, he is still working on that problem of how, technically, a human being unifies a thought with an action, will with work, ends and means. So I might read it later. Then there was a bit called the "Metaphysics of Experience" and I skipped right over that, looking for a section less about philosophers and more about schools, because I was anxious to get "into" it and terrified that the whole thing would be much harder than I'd expected.

Dewey's writing style sounds very much like transcriptions of lectures – who knows? - perhaps it is. So I had Paul read aloud to me the essay *Having an Experience*, but we didn't get very far and Paul said he

didn't understand a word of it himself. So I gave that up and picked the last section, thematically organized around the idea of Experience as Problematic. (*I have often found experience to be problematic myself, and I'm sure you will agree.*) Here I made much better progress. The first section was about Good. I rather like that kind of basic question in philosophy, and here's the quote I'd hope to see on a poster: "All the serious perplexities of life come back to the genuine difficulty of forming a judgment as to the values of the situation; they come back to a conflict of Goods. Only dogmatism can suppose that serious moral conflict is between something clearly bad and something known to be good..." I believe this to be an essential point in ethics, in manners, in understanding history, and in understanding our neighbors. Dewey asks science to guide us in understanding what is good, and expects that understanding to change as we learn, suggesting that values about what is Good and Right should be considered hypothesis to be proven through experience – or changed, if they do not hold up. "A moral law, like a law in physics, is not something to swear by and stick to at all hazards; it is a formula of the way to respond when specified conditions present themselves."

He also talks a fair bit about the brutally oppressive effect that "modern" industrial life has on people: "...the life men, women and children actually lead, the opportunities open to them, the values they are capable of enjoying, their education, their share in all the things of art and science, are mainly determined by economic conditions. Hence we can hardly expect a moral system which ignores economic conditions to be other than remote and empty." He is concerned not only for the poor but for the "captains of finance and industry" who cannot be "captains of their own souls" because they get only personal gain from their success, rather than feeling a wider participation in social gains. He is concerned that while our technology becomes more collective and corporate (even back then), our moral (and legal) systems are still based on the feudal period. He's not a Marxist, though – he is seriously into democracy and loves Walt Whitman.

I'm afraid I'll never get the assignment done at this point so I must content myself with highlighting, answer the questions we were given, and hope to say something intelligent in class.

One of the things I love about reading Dewey is that he asks a lot of questions – more than he answers. But when he does answer, he also has a charming habit of saying "There are three important points," and then he labels them neatly: first, second and third. Our professor has asked us four questions about the reading. **The first question is: What problems does Dewey deal with?**

His major philosophical project is the synthesis of thought and experience. The editor of the books sums up: "...for Dewey, in the most fundamental sense, philosophy deals with experience which is "had" – that is, undergone, lived." "Things interacting in certain ways" are not only *what* is experienced, they *are* experience.

The second question is: What themes arise in the reading?

- interaction of the human organism with nature and the role of the body in philosophy
- realism – the world *exists* independently of our thoughts, but our thoughts are what create the *meaning* in/of the world; What it means to know something

- aesthetic, affective sense as being just as important as logic; “Artists have always been the real purveyors of news...”
- liberty and democracy – “history in being a process of change generates change not only in details but also in the method of directing social change” “...get rid of the ideas that democratic conditions automatically maintain themselves”
- the meaning of life is found in growth and change. He liked Plato, probably for his dialectic ?? style, but I think he would not agree that what is most real is that which is eternally changeless.
- he was concerned about the oppressiveness of modern social institutions, especially schools

The third question is: What in Dewey’s work seems most relevant today?

Dewey would not have been pleased, I think, if his fans took everything he wrote as Final and tried to make a school today exactly like his lab school in Chicago. He is most relevant in firmly insisting that philosophy should be relevant. I believe the biggest challenge for our schools is rooted in the idea of a school as a factory, still, and a sort of hatred of, or perhaps fear of, children that runs underneath everything. Dewey’s approach to learning as a whole experience is much healthier and I think still very useful. A longer answer to this question might be my dissertation someday.

The fourth question is: What else do I have to say?

Despite having skipped over the rest of the Historical Roots section, I am still interested in how his philosophy developed in the context of World War I. It’s an interesting time period for people thinking about individuals and societies, class and economy, and so on. I’ve been highlighting the original publication dates for each essay, and I think it would be interesting to read them in chronological order, noting which were written before and after which of the World Wars. He does mention WWI in *Culture and Human Nature*, which I want to read again more carefully.

He also makes a big point of insisting that reform must come through peaceful communication and never through force. That was interesting, because we’d just been reading Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and his critics often seem a little anxious about his connection with revolutionaries. It’s hard to imagine John Dewey as a dangerous revolutionary, but maybe at the time...? Certainly he got into political trouble for something. But he speaks firmly against violence and looks for his revolution through “communication and enlightenment,” and speaks of the Great Society becoming a Great Community. I expect he’d have been very excited about the internet. He has a whole essay on the difference between a liberal and a radical. And he isn’t against technology, though he finds it an oppressive force at the time of his writing: “When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not a despotic master.”

From 1896 to 1904 Dewey ran the University of Chicago lab school, with about 100 students. In 1904 it seems university politics were against him and the school was sort of pulled out from under him. He left the university and it seems to have been pretty devastating. He made it longer than poor Mr. Alcott and his school though! I haven’t seen what he thinks of the New England transcendentalists: the references are all back in the section with more philosophy. I wonder, too, if he was reading John Stuart Mill, who was about a generation before him but overlapping.

Meanwhile, back on the ranch, I have decided to start giving Emily money for good grades. I don't know whether Dewey would approve of this or not. It's certainly not how I was brought up – we were supposed to learn things because one loves to learn, and good grades naturally follow. I got an allowance and the money was not connected to any particular labor, in or out of school. (Ha! And now we see how well that sort of upbringing has served....) But anyway, to whatever extent that sort of thinking “worked” for me, it will not work for Emily.

If she becomes a person who loves to learn it will be despite her school's being fairly horrible, and when she does get good grades it has very little to do with learning any *academic* content. If she's going to make it into the middle class she needs to learn how to jump through the required hoops: to get along with people who have power over her, who will look down on her for her family background and her country accent, and who will blame her for her circumstances more and more as she gets older. She needs to learn how to play by their rules, and learn when it's worthwhile to break the rules. This all came fairly naturally to me, but for Emily it is hard work, and the rewards are distant and vague. She still thinks she's going to college someday, and I think there's still a possible future where that might happen – and then, perhaps, she'll have another opportunity to simply learn for the love of learning. But in the meantime, if it gets her safely past eighth grade I'll consider it money well spent. And (ahem) this term will not pose a huge problem for my budget, I'm sorry to say. But she has time to improve before the end of the year, and I'll have time to save up a bit more.

She'll be 14 on Tuesday – it's so strange to think if I'd had a child when I was “supposed to” he or she would be going to high school with Emily next year. I wondered if Dewey had ever had children: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote a very cute book about how a child ideally should be brought up and educated, left his own illegitimate kid on the doorstep of an abbey orphanage, so one must wonder about philosophers of education. But I checked up on Dewey and he was married twice (his first wife died, and he married again twenty years later when he was in his eighties), and he had several children, two of whom died tragically young, and he also adopted a child. His house was somewhat famous for being full of children and grandchildren all the time (and also Irish and Chinese revolutionaries on the run, according to the introduction of the book).

I hope your own classes are going well – will this be the last semester? and that you're seeing some signs of spring in Boston. Give Bea a big kiss from me, and tell her I need a new picture for my refrigerator – something with rabbits, please, for Easter.

-Rebecca

**I must tell you that the other day Paul and I were having coffee with an acquaintance of his: Paul is still determined to move to Memphis, and I am trying to be positive and supportive of this plan, although you know my feelings about it are mixed at best. Anyway, this was a very nice lady, an anthropologist, who loves Memphis, because she moved here from somewhere else. Native Memphians hate Memphis. She is working on a book about white teenagers listening to black music in Memphis in the 1950s, so we talked about race and politics and music and the editing of academic journals and the possibility of finding jobs. The coffeeshop was one of those earnestly hip places in the very small liberal-white bohemian district; the tables were ugly and the chairs miscellaneously assorted, the young people there were very thin and fashionable – I'm sure they live on nothing but coffee and locally raised fresh eggs. The kid at the table next to ours was a white boy with a student's serious-looking beard; he was wearing a vintage-styled pin-striped suit complete with vest and tie; plugged into his headphones, drinking fancy coffee out of a delicately chipped mug, simultaneously checking his email on an iphone and reading a dog-eared paperback copy of Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Ite, missa est...*